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On Language and Change: Part D Final

Since the advent of text messaging and social media, a seemingly new form of the English language has emerged. Dubbed textese, it relies heavily on short-form communication, including clippings, abbreviations, and number homophones. Its prominent use by young speakers and writers of English has prompted much concern from parents and educators alike. There are many who view textese as a lazy, uneducated form of English that headlines its deterioration. However, such concerns are unfounded and in fact quite contrary to the true effects of textese.

If one thing is certain about language, it is change. That a language stirs and molds into a new form is something inevitable. After all, language must “adapt to the needs of its users” (Birner). The presence of textese is not something to be taken aback by. Historically, English has undergone far more extreme shifts than the birth of textese. The English of *Beowulf*, Chaucer, and Shakespeare are all distinct--and so too is ours. Betty Birner of the Linguistic Society of America notes that the common feathery fowl was not always known as a *bird*. In Old English, it was known as a *brid*. However, corruption of the term persisted through the ages, and now we would be hard-pressed to find any proponent of *brid* in English. No matter the degree, change in language is an expectation, not a surprise. That is not to say, however, that any change in language is inherently “good.”

Critics of textese fear the potentially negative effects it may have on young people's English skills. They worry its use will be so habitual that kids will bring it into the classroom. Indeed, such cases have been reported. In Scotland, a 13-year-old student wrote her English essay entirely in textese, much to the dismay of her teacher (Cramb). And David Finkle, a high school English teacher in Florida, found that his students often shorthand "you" as "u" in his classroom (Martin). However, such occurrences make up but a small fraction of the entire student body and are easily remedied by a red pen. More importantly, they say nothing about a student's knowledge of the proper form of English suitable for academia. Lack of knowledge is not the same as willful ignorance.

The core concern is that students who are too accustomed to textese will be desensitized to poor grammatical skills and be unable to identify them in formal writing. Researchers Herco Steyn and Rinelle Evans of the University of Pretoria conducted a study to evaluate to what degree textese has detached students from their knowledge of formal written English. Their findings concluded that students have no problem separating formal and informal writing, and that "the negative portrayal of textese in the media is unfounded, as is the concern about the decay of English" (Steyn and Evans).

Textese is shown to be indicative of much more than a convenient shortcut. Contrary to the myth that it is leading to a decay in modern English, textese actually proves beneficial. Another study was conducted in The Netherlands by a group of linguists who sought to analyze the effects of textese on students' grammatical skills. Their study further assuages fears that it is hurting students' performance. What was in fact found was that textese "improve[s] children's

abilities in written language...[and] may also enhance their grammar abilities in spoken language” (Van Dijk et al).

On a higher level, Columbia University English professor John McWhorter, who also hosts the Lexicon Valley podcast, feels that we have in fact grown to be more sophisticated in recent times. He explains that we have become much more aware of “the states and minds of others” (McWhorter). Textese is reflective of that awareness. Texting, according to McWhorter, is a “cr[y] out for substitutes for facial expressions and intonations that cushion and nuance spoken conversation.” It is often hard to translate exactly what is meant into written form. Textese has by far made the most progress on that front. It represents, more accurately than ever before, the thoughts and emotions of the spoken word.

Much of the criticism surrounding textese stems from beliefs that appear obvious but are rather groundless. The fear that it will overtake the formal standard of English is unjustified. Such a standard exists for a reason, and a change as non-radical as textese is “unlikely...[to] replace traditional literacy practices” (Steyn and Evans). Furthermore, proponents of textese certainly do not champion its use in academia and other formal settings. It is simply seen as a wonderfully rich and creative layer that has been added to the ever-changing English language.

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